

ART MONTHLY

AUSTRALASIA



**'Starstruck' summer edition:
Pipilotti Rist at the MCA; Brett Whiteley on trial
Mami Kataoka in conversation with Julie Ewington**

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WELCOME TO ISSUE 304

As *Art Monthly's* Summer edition is spirited away to press each November, it is a time for brief reflection – on the year past, with an exhausted but excitable eye also trained on the horizon for all those future editions ahead.

And so it is again in 2017, our thirtieth year in Australia (and second as *Art Monthly Australasia*). Proofreading this Summer edition just now, I see a year compressed in these pages: a vibrant engagement with the Asia-Pacific and a privileging of the artist's voice. And, I hope, a deep reverence for art history as our stepping-off point into the future.

Even our choice of cover image – a still from the seminal Australian film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) – seems strangely resonant, channelling (I like to think) art's desire to shapeshift and time travel. As that film's heroine Miranda (Anne-Louise Lambert) so memorably mused: 'Everything begins and ends at exactly the right time and place.'

It is also with a heavy heart that I sign off for the year, learning of the recent loss of *Art Monthly's* longtime Board member Michael Whitworth, a modest but extraordinarily generous and mellifluous-voiced patron of the arts. He will be missed.

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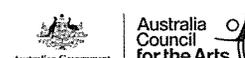
Cover:
David Kynoch, *Anne-Louise Lambert as Miranda*, 1975,
from the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* directed by Peter Weir;
image courtesy Peter Weir, Picnic Productions, and the
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THE VISUAL ARTS AND CRAFT STRATEGY



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‘It’s not that I’m afraid to die ...’

Kit Messham-Muir, *Perth*



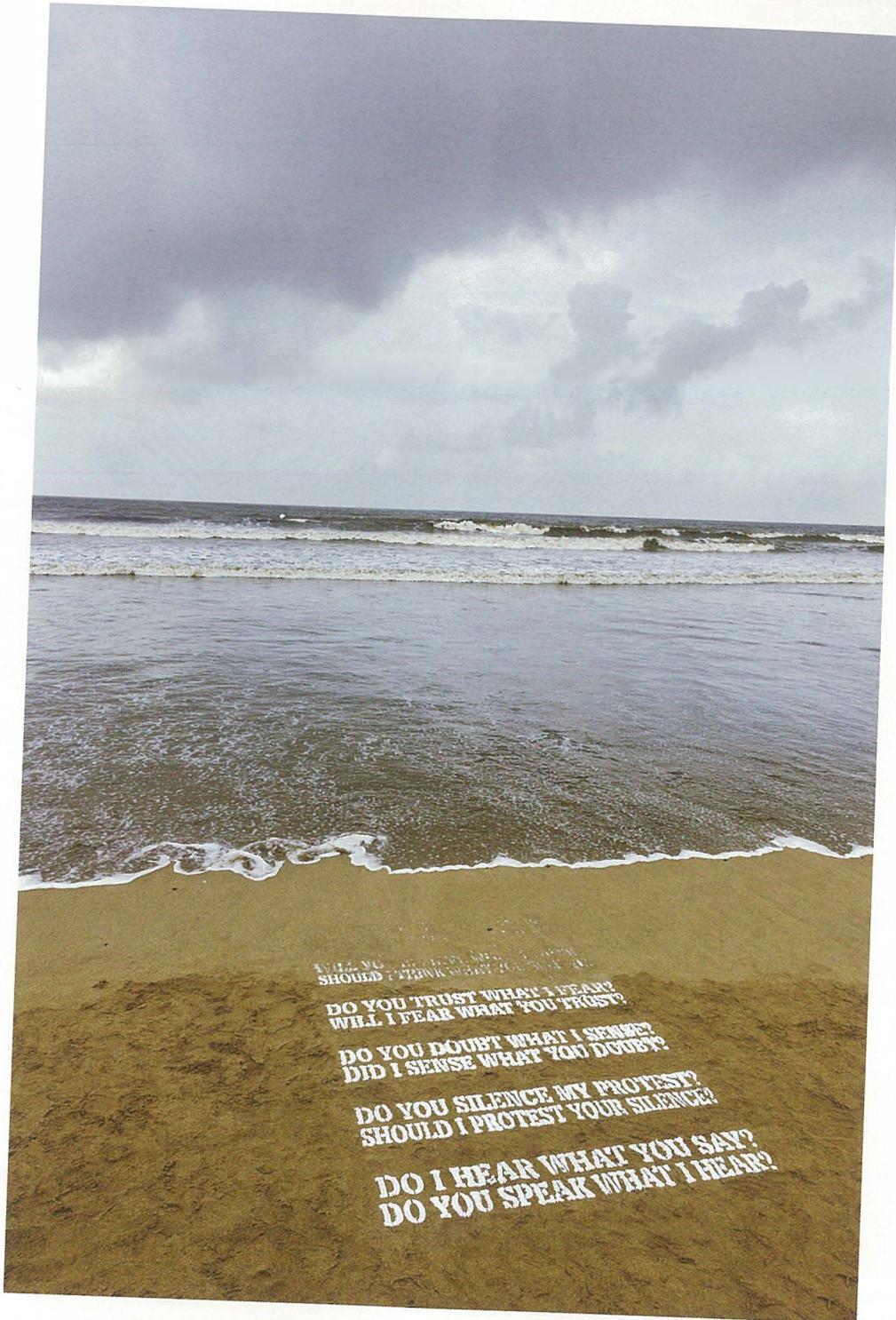
‘I don’t want to be there when it happens’ shares its title with one of the exhibition’s central works by Adeela Suleman, which in turn borrows a line from Woody Allen’s 1975 play *Death: A Comedy in One Act*. The character of Kleinman, a death-obsessed neurotic clearly modelled after Allen himself, suffers a violent death at the hands of an assassin, and as he slips into the abyss is asked if he is afraid of what’s coming. He responds: ‘It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.’ It might seem a tenuous link to this exhibition (first seen at Sydney’s 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in August, and now in expanded form at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts), but the title’s origin is pertinent. Throughout Allen’s plays and movies, death is an interloper, the subject of neuroses, distanced by humour – repressed, barely, through symbolic means.

In Australian visual culture since 9/11, through conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, representations of violence and death have become prolific, while our actual experience of such deaths remains mostly isolated by geography and sublimated by greater levels of representation. The levity of the exhibition’s title, and of Suleman’s work, sets the scene for the overarching theme of ‘I don’t want to be there when it happens’ – the depiction of violent death and trauma that happens, for its Australian audience, elsewhere and to others. As the curators in their catalogue essay for the Sydney iteration of the show noted: ‘Ensnared in the relative safety of daily mundanities one can easily divorce the realities of war when living in Sydney.’ In Perth, often said to be the most remote city in the world, this sense of splendid isolation from the mainstream of political violence is magnified.

The Sydney show included works by Pakistani artists Suleman and Raj Kumar, and a video installation by Australian artists Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, *Earthwork* (2016), which was perhaps a bridge for Australian audiences to access the experience of the two Pakistani artists. In this floor-mounted work, the monitor followed a drone-like image of urban topography. Of course, low-grade targeting images have been a visual trope of western neo-colonial military interventions since the ‘smart bomb’ videos at media briefings during the First Gulf War. They next emerged into mainstream consciousness with the so-called ‘Collateral Murder’ video, recorded from the targeting system of a United States Apache helicopter, and leaked by Chelsea Manning to WikiLeaks and released in 2010. This video showed a crowd of men, including two Reuters journalists wrongly identified as insurgents, who were subsequently torn apart by bursts of 30mm rounds. However in *Earthwork*, an urban Australian landscape was seen in that format, and made-strange or, more accurately, made-military.

Also in Sydney were the more abstracted works by Kumar and Suleman. The veil of pressed-tin birds of the latter’s *After all it’s always somebody else who dies* (2017) appeared seductively decorative until we learned that each bird stood for a violent human death in the artist’s hometown of Karachi. Similarly, the thousands of playing dice that made up Kumar’s nine prayer mats, arranged to face Mecca, gestured to the instability and risk experienced as a religious minority – in his case as a Hindu in a predominantly Muslim region.

For the current iteration at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), the curators have augmented these same artists and works with further selections from Reena Saini



Sneha Saini Kallat, *Saline Notations (Echoes)*, 2015, digital print on Hahnemuhle photo rag archival paper and dibond; image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai

Opposite:
Ajay Kumar, *Meet, Pray and Pay*, 2016, playing dices, 118 x 66 x 1.2cm (each, nine mats in total); image courtesy the artist



Adeela Suleman, *After all it's always someone else who dies*, 2017, installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, 2017; hanging steel, dimensions variable; commissioned by 4A and supported by the Keir Foundation; photo: Kai Wasikowski

Kallat, Raqs Media Collective, Mithu Sen and Abdullah M. I. Syed. Whereas the Sydney version seemed ‘a little sparse’, PICA has upped the ante not only in terms of numbers, but also in shifting from its curatorial focus on Pakistan to now include that country’s perennial adversary, India – and only shortly following the seventieth anniversary of the Partition of India and the large-scale violence and displacement that followed.

The larger curatorial scope seems not so much concerned with the hostilities of nation-states but, rather, the complexities and poetic possibilities that arise through individual and personal lived experiences. Kallat’s work is a case in point. Her family migrated from Pakistan to India, and the photographic work *Saline Notations (Echoes)* (2015) depicts a poem by Rabindranath Tagore written on a beach in salt – itself a symbol of Indian colonial resistance – consumed by the encroaching tide and returning to the salt of the sea. Raqs Media Collective’s *The Translator’s Silence* (2012–17) and Sen’s *I have only one language; it is not mine* (2014) also contemplate the role of language and loss-in-translation. To varying degrees, all of the works in the show are about states of voicelessness. Syed’s *Flying Rug of Drones (Circle)* (2015–17), a floating plane of drones crafted from razor blades, seems like a riposte to Leber and Chesworth’s drone-like video, bringing it back to the raw physicality of steel and flesh, and the impossibility for words to capture real pain and loss.

Over the last ten years or so, a number of high-profile Australian contemporary artists such as Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, Shaun Gladwell, Ben Quilty and Wendy Sharpe have been commissioned as official war artists to consider the experience of Australian defence force personnel in war zones. What is missing, of course, is the voice of the locals: the Afghans, the Iraqis, the Timorese. ‘I don’t want to be there when it happens’ brings into this visual field of inquiry perspectives that potentially problematise the discourse without resorting to didactic or literal statements on political violence. Rather, these artists maintain a poetic and aesthetic dimension that helps articulate something about the violence inherent in the loss of a voice.

1. Kathleen Linn, ‘Reviews: *I don’t want to be there when it happens*’, *un Projects*, 28 September 2017; see unprojects.org.au/un-extended/reviews/i-dont-want-to-be-there-when-it-happens/, accessed 3 October 2017.

Curated by Mikala Tai, Eugenio Viola and Kate Warren, ‘I don’t want to be there when it happens’ is currently on display at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts until 24 December 2017; an earlier and smaller iteration was shown at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, from 18 August until 8 October 2017.

